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County announces crackdown on drunken driving

By: GIG CONAUGHTON - Staff Writer

SAN DIEGO -- County residents on probation for drunken driving soon may hear unexpected knocks on their doors ---- complete with surprise searches for booze and drugs ---- because of a new state-funded crackdown.

"The goal, really, is to save lives," said Gonzalo Mendez, the county probation supervisor who will head up a new nine-person team to conduct random drug tests, compel probationers to attend alcohol and drug counseling, and conduct surprise home searches. "The bottom line is I'm trying to save you (drunken driver) from killing somebody."

People on probation for felony drunken driving convictions have been ordered by the courts as a condition of their probation to abstain from drinking, whether they're driving or not, Mendez said. Searches of their homes could result in them being sent to jail, or could pressure them into seeking the professional counseling often ordered by the courts.

Mendez said Tuesday he doesn't expect the random searches and drug testing to create much controversy because the program ---- which will be funded by a \$1.103 million state grant ---- will be aimed at felony drunken drivers who have waived their constitutional protections from unreasonable searches in order to avoid jail.

American Civil Liberties Union leaders declined to comment Monday.

Officials from the County of San Diego, the California Office of Traffic Safety, Mothers Against Drunk Driving and the San Diego Police Department plan to announce the new "crackdown" program at 10 a.m. today at the County Administration Center in San Diego.

San Diego County's \$1.013 million award is actually part of a \$5 million, two-year state grant that the county will administer. Vince Iaria, head of the county's probation department, said the county would dole out the remaining \$3.987 million among 16 other counties to fund similar programs.

Iaria and Mendez said the county would use its cash to create the nine-member probation-officer team. And the team would conduct searches and drug and alcohol testing as a pre-emptive strike to pull drunken drivers off the road before they get behind the wheel. The program will also result in more checkpoints to find drivers under the influence.

Chris Murphy, assistant director of the state's office of traffic safety, said the state funding was unprecedented. He also said the programs were badly needed.

Traffic safety officials have reported progress in their fight to cut drunken driving and driving under the influence arrests, convictions and deaths in the 1980s and 1990s.

But they said that progress has reversed itself in the new millennium.

Alcohol-involved traffic deaths have been on the rise since 2000.

The Department of Motor Vehicles ---- the agency charged with tracking drunken driving statistics ---- reported in its 2006 annual study that:

- Alcohol-related traffic deaths increased by 1.2 percent statewide in 2004 ---- the latest statistical information available ---- with

1,460 people killed, including 115 deaths in San Diego County. Alcohol-related traffic deaths had declined every year for more than a decade before 1999.

- Drunken driving-related injuries increased by 0.07 percent, with 31,512 injured.

- Driving under the influence arrests decreased slightly in 2004, by 1.4 percent. But that followed two straight years of increases, by 3.7 percent in 2003 and 0.3 percent in 2002.

Murphy said the intent of the super-charged surveillance programs was to focus on the "worst of the worst" offenders ---- drunken drivers who have multiple convictions or who have injured others.

Mendez said the program will track about 400 to 500 felony offenders from among the 1,500 people who are arrested each year.

Iaria and Mendez both said they have no concerns ---- legal, moral or otherwise ---- about the close scrutiny of the offenders.

They said statistics show that roughly 25 percent of all people arrested for drunken driving are repeat offenders, people who put themselves and others at risk.

Iaria said he recently asked his staff to compile a "dirty-dozen" lineup of the county's worst offenders currently on probation. He said the list included a 51-year-old man on probation who had three prior drunken driving convictions, as well as a prior domestic violence conviction. Iaria said that the man allegedly, after drinking heavily recently, drove a car onto an embankment and got stuck. He was subsequently taken to a hospital, where tests showed he had a 0.34 percent blood-alcohol level ---- more than three times higher than the 0.08 legal limit.

Iaria said another one of the "dirty dozen" was a 50-year-old woman who was in jail for two separate offenses and released on probation. The woman, he said, then allegedly committed a new driving-under-the-influence offense when she collided with a parked car while "severely impaired" on prescription drugs and cocaine. He said the woman was arrested again while awaiting sentencing.

Mendez, meanwhile, said he personally had been victimized by someone driving drunk.

He said his brother, Carlos Mendez, was killed by a drunken driver.

"July 4, 2000," he said. "He was my only brother. July 4 is a difficult time."

In addition, Mendez said, a close family friend was recently killed by another drunken driver ---- a repeat offender.

He said he believed searching offenders' homes, seeking clues as to whether they might re-offend, could keep a killer off the road, or help reform a father or mother.

"I wouldn't be involved in this if I didn't really believe in it," he said.

Iaria, meanwhile, said while the program could send some offenders to jail, he hoped that might force probationers to straighten up.

"The other thing is we want is to pressure them into treatment if they're not in," he said. "That may be a better answer than just putting them in jail."

Meanwhile, County Supervisor Dianne Jacob, who is scheduled to speak at today's press conference, said she also hoped that the program could make a dent.

"We have to try," Jacob said. "This is a problem that has not stopped. There are far too many preventable deaths, and far too many preventable injuries because of drunk drivers. People need to learn not to drink and drive ---- period."

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